

# Improving Access to Prekindergarten for Children of Immigrants

## *Building Relationships*

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As word gets out to immigrant families about available, desirable prekindergarten (pre-K) programs, outreach can become self-sustaining. To get there, programs need to build trust and good relationships with parents and communities. They also need to design programs sensitive to the needs of immigrant families.

We gathered the following strategies for developing immigrant-friendly pre-K programs and building self-sustaining outreach.

### **Building Strong Relationships with Parents**

The experts we interviewed recommended the following strategies for building and cementing ties to immigrant families.

- **Have a welcoming attitude** so families and communities know that pre-K is a safe, friendly place for all families, regardless of nationality or immigration status. Immigrant parents may be wary of school-based pre-K because of previous negative experiences with other public institutions or services. Some programs offer cultural sensitivity training to teachers and staff or hire a trained translator to be the public face of the program. But even saying “hello” in a parent’s language can go a long way toward building rapport between parents and schools.

- **Work with trusted community partners**, such as immigrant-serving nonprofits, to gain buy-in. Groups that work with immigrant families can relay information about pre-K to parents and report back about potential enrollment barriers or other issues. Some pre-K programs are run directly by such community-based organizations.

- **Proactively engage and include immigrant parents** in school activities, such as orientation and open

houses, to help them become more comfortable with the school. Parent-teacher conferences in the family’s home can help staff better understand a family’s circumstances and culture.

Taking a page from Head Start, another way to involve parents is to create parent leadership roles. Parent leaders can help shape pre-K programs and provide ongoing feedback about what works well for both parents and children.

Most states require that their pre-K programs actively engage parents. Some states require home visits; others require school districts to hire family involvement specialists or have parents on advisory boards. Those seeking state funds for pre-K must, in some states, report on parent engagement activities. States that ensure their parent engagement activities reach immigrant parents can help foster communication between schools and parents who might need extra encouragement to participate.

### **Project Motivation and Overview**

Pre-K has been shown to strongly boost children’s learning trajectories. This is as true, or even truer, for children of immigrants and English language learners (ELLs) as for children overall.

But children of immigrants, who make up about a quarter of children in the United States, have significantly lower rates of pre-K enrollment, on average, than children with US-born parents. Issues such as a lack of awareness about programs, language barriers, logistical barriers to enrollment, and lack of comfort with programs can keep immigrant parents from signing their children up for pre-K.

We interviewed local and state pre-K directors and staff, directors of other early childhood education programs, and early childhood education specialists to compile their strategies for stepping up enrollment among immigrant families.

This is the third of three fact sheets based on *Supporting Immigrant Families’ Access to Prekindergarten* by Julia Gelatt, Gina Adams, and Sandra Huerta.

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### Building Immigrant-Friendly Programs

Some accommodations can make pre-K programs a more comfortable place for immigrant families, making it more likely that they will enroll their children and encourage other parents to do the same. Some states have begun to codify immigrant-friendly pre-K requirements or develop programs to increase funding and staffing for immigrant-inclusive early education. We review some of these requirements here, as well as ideas for building immigrant-friendly programs.

- **Build capacity for communicating with immigrant parents** in their own language. Pre-K programs have relied on translators and interpreters for their school district or shared these staff with Head Start, used phone interpretation services, and turned to parent or community volunteer interpreters. However, programs should be careful to ensure confidentiality when using a non-professional interpreter. Some programs advise not using children as interpreters as this puts an unfair burden on the children and affects parent-child relationships. Because parents may have different levels of literacy, even in their native language, one director recommended that outreach materials be easy to read and contain lots of pictures.

- **Address logistical barriers.** Immigrant parents are more likely to work long, inflexible, or nonstandard work schedules that make it hard to pick children up at the end of the pre-K school day. They are also less likely to drive than other parents. Some solutions to these barriers include using district-funded buses and drivers to transport pre-K students or,

as one district did, gathering children from a neighborhood to walk together to school with adult supervision. To meet parents' desire for extended hours, some pre-K programs have blended funding from other sources, such as Head Start, child care subsidies, local programs, and private funding. Some states fund pre-K in community-based child care settings that operate on a full-day schedule.

- **Build cultural competency** for pre-K instruction that supports families' cultural beliefs and practices and for culturally appropriate staff communication with parents. Programs can do this by hiring from within diverse communities (for all positions), training existing staff, and relying on parent volunteers in the classroom.

Some states are working to build a culturally competent workforce as a whole by offering training on how to work with English language learners and diverse classrooms. In some places, pre-K directors are working with local colleges to add cultural competency to teacher education programs.

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